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BASEBALL IN AMERICAN FICTION.

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BASEBALL FICTION HAS MOVED FROM THE JUVENILE STORIES OF THE TURN OF THE CENTURY TO ADULT FICTION IN WHICH THE GAME IS EXAMINED FOR THE LIGHT IT SHEDS ON THE PARADOXES OF AMERICAN LIFE. EARLY BASEBALL FICTION WAS DIRECTED TOWARD THE DIME-NOVEL AUDIENCE, BUT AFTER WORLD WAR I, SUCH WRITERS AS HEYWOOD BROUN AND RING LARDNER AIMED FOR ADULT READERS AND PRODUCED ACCOUNTS OF BASEBALL CONTAINING VALID INSIGHTS INTO THE AMERICAN SCENE. IN THE 30'S, THOMAS WOLFE, NELSON ALGREN, AND JAMES T. FARRELL WROTE ABOUT THE GAME IN THEIR NOVELS, AND SINCE WORLD WAR II, WRITERS HAVE PRODUCED BASEBALL FICTION RANGING FROM FANTASY TO REALISTIC NOVELS. THE BEST RECENT BASEBALL FICTION (E.G., BERNARD MALAMUD'S "THE NATURAL" AND MARK HARRIS' "THE SOUTHPAW," "BANG THE DRUM SLOWLY," AND "A TICKET FOR SEAMSTITCH") CONCENTRATES NOT MERELY ON THE GAME OR THE PLAYERS' LIVES BUT ON THE UNIVERSAL PROBLEMS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (NOVEMBER 1967), 1107-14.) (LH)

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Baseball in American Fiction

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MARK TWAIN had an explanation for the popularity and influence of baseball during his time. "Baseball is the very symbol," he wrote, "the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century." A contemporary writer, Jacques Barzun, also testified to the importance of baseball in American life when he wrote, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game . . . ." In spite of the twentieth-century competition of football and basketball, baseball remains our most popular game, at least in the opinion of a historian such as Bruce Catton (see "The Great American Game," *American Heritage*, April 1959) and according to a poll of persons attending the New York World's Fair. Since it is an important part of our culture, it has been inevitable that the influence and popularity of the sport would be reflected in American literature. American writers have had to take note of baseball's important place in the national scene, and many of them have themselves been subject to the baseball fever. The game has always had a special attraction for the intellectual. (See "Intellectuals and Ballplayers" by Roger Kahn in *The American Scholar*, Summer 1957.)

Early baseball fiction was mainly directed at juveniles, but during the first quarter of the twentieth century when baseball reporters such as Ring Lardner, Heywood Broun, and Gerald Beaumont turned to writing baseball stories designed for adult readers, they produced fiction that has merit apart from its sports content. During the past thirty years, in the novels of Thomas Wolfe and James T. Farrell, two of the most distinctly American writers this country has produced, and the baseball novels of Bernard Malamud and Mark Harris, the importance of the sport in any true picture of American society has been recognized. Although they are baseball stories, Malamud's *The Natural* and Harris' diamond novels do not have the game as their primary concern but are interested in the tragic-comical paradoxes of modern existence and reveal interest-

ing and universal insights into human behavior.

In addition to the movement from baseball fiction directed at juveniles to stories intended for adults, there has been a shift in the presentation of the ballplayer himself. In the early stories the athlete was a heroic figure with the highest moral standards engaged in a heroic occupation, an athlete who rose from the bush leagues often to own a major league team after his playing days were over. More recent authors have seen him as a man whose career is almost over when he reaches thirty, an innocent, simple person unable to adjust to the new life and temptations of the big city, a man whose hopes and dreams remain unrealized.

APART from a passage (at the end of Chapter XLII) in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), early baseball fiction was sub-literary in spite of its great popularity. In Mark Twain's novel, the Yankee, Hank Morgan, introduces the game into sixth-century England to replace the tournament as an escape for "the extra steam of chivalry" and to keep the knights entertained and out of mischief. The experiment affords Mark Twain the opportunity for some of his superb humor because the knights play the game clad in full armor. Consequently, they never avoid ground balls, with the result that balls rebound at great distances. When they slid, it was "like an ironclad coming into port."

In the nineteenth century, though, the dime novel was the leading source of early baseball fiction. Among the most popular and important were *Muldoon's Baseball Club in Philadelphia*, by Tom Teaser (Wide Awake Library No. 971), published in 1890, a hilarious novel describing games between Muldoon's Irish Baseball Club and the "Gold Ball Club," Harry Wright's Athletics, the Germantown Guzzlers, and others; and *Yale Murphy, The Great Shortstop; or The Little Midget of the Giants*, by Bill Boxer, Referee (New York Five Cent Library No. 87), published in 1892, which traces the exploits of a Yale player from the Yale-Princeton games to the Giants in the old Polo Grounds.

With the appearance of the Frank Merriwell stories by Burt L. Standish (Gilbert Patten) in Street and Smith's *Tip Top Weekly* in 1896, stories about baseball achieved a far wider audience. It is estimated that each edition of the stories was read by a million persons weekly. Although Merriwell was a star in all sports, he achieved his greatest fame on the diamond with his famous double-shoot, a delivery that curved in two directions on the way to the plate, a pitch that no major leaguer from Christy Mathewson to Sandy Koufax has been able to duplicate. As a result of Merriwell's diamond exploits, the expressions "a Frank Merriwell play" or a "Frank Merriwell finish" became stock phrases in describing exciting or spectacular performances in fields other than baseball and remain a permanent part of our language.

Although many of the numerous Merriwell stories contained no baseball action (the Merriwell stories continued to appear into the 1920's), others are liberally sprinkled with accounts of baseball games. A typical Merriwell finish occurs in the chapter, "A Hot Finish," in *Frank Merriwell at Yale*. Although only a freshman, young Frank has been promoted to the Yale varsity baseball team. Yale and Harvard have each won one game in their annual series, and the deciding contest is to be held at Springfield, Massachusetts, neutral ground. Merriwell, relatively untried in varsity competition, must pitch the crucial game because Old Eli's regular varsity hurler has a sore arm.

The tension mounts as Merriwell and the clever Harvard pitcher keep the opponents scoreless for five innings. In

the sixth Harvard scores a run (on errors, of course), and the game goes into the last half of the ninth with Yale still shut out. Then, with two out and a man on first, Merriwell faces the Harvard pitcher, Yedding, who laughs in his face (Yedding had previously performed the rare feat of striking Frank out). With a count of two and two, Merriwell drives the next pitch to deep left field, and with "every man, woman, and child standing" and with much shouting and waving of "flags, hats, or handkerchiefs," he scurries around the bases and slides home in a cloud of dust. Then, after sudden silence:

> "Safe home!" rang the voice of the umpire. Then another roar, louder, wilder, full of unbounded joy! The Yale cheer! The band drowned by all the uproar! The sight of sturdy lads in blue, delirious with delight, hugging a dust-covered youth, lifting him to their shoulders, and bearing him away in triumph. Merriwell had won his own game, and his record was made. It was a glorious finish!

In spite of their popularity, the Merriwell stories have serious weaknesses —stock characterization, stilted dialogue, improbable situations, and heavy moralizing lessen their literary value.

IN addition to the Merriwell stories, Gilbert Patten produced two other series of baseball fiction, along with individual baseball novels. One group, the "Big-League Series" (1914 ff.), written under the Burt L. Standish pseudonym, traces the rise of Phil Hazelton, who plays under the name of Lefty Locke, from the bush leagues to the majors to the ultimate ownership of a major league team. These stories are more realistic and display Patten's intimate knowledge of the game gained from his managing a professional baseball team in the old Knox County League in Maine during the summers of 1890 and 1891. Among his players were the famous Bill Corrigan of the Boston Red Sox and Mike Powers of the Cincinnati Reds. However, it was in the "College Life Series," written under his own name, that Patten produced his best baseball fiction. The novels center on Roger Boltwood of Yale. In the best of the lot, *Sons of Old Eli* (1923), Boltwood takes over as playing manager of a minor-league team. Not only are the dialogue and the situations more realistic, but the book is an interesting study of the impact of a ball team on the life of a small town and is free from the moralizing of the Merriwell novels. Boltwood even smokes cigars.

Rivalling Patten's baseball fiction in popularity was the "Baseball Joe" series of Lester Chadwick (the pseudonym of Edward Stratemeyer, a prolific writer of books for boys, who turned out the Tom Swift series under the pseudonym of Victor Appleton and the famous Rover Boy books under the name of Arthur M. Winfield, plus other series in his spare time). The fourteen Baseball Joe novels, which appeared over a span of twenty-three years from before World War I to the 1920's, trace the career of Joe Matson from the sandlots to the Giants and ultimately to club ownership. Joe also made a stop at Yale en route. This series is less sophisticated and realistic than Patten's novels, and the books are filled with impossible dialogue and situation. Joe is not only the outstanding pitcher in the league but the leading hitter as well. When he doesn't pitch, he plays in the outfield. The popularity of the series in spite of its literary flaws is evidence of the American boy's insatiable interest in the game.

A FAR better craftsman than Stratemeyer or Patten was Ralph Henry Barbour, many of whose approximately 150 books deal with baseball. His dialogue is more natural, his plots fresher, his de-

scription an integral part of the novels, and his portrayal of character more important in the outcome of the action. In novels such as *Weatherby's Inning*, *The Crimson Sweater*, and *For the Honor of the School*, he vividly described the games in detail and at the same time made a case for honesty and simplicity in sports and showed that for the average boy athletics were an aid rather than a detriment to study. Barbour's schools are greatly romanticized and idealized. The books seem highly sentimental to the modern reader with their accounts of the boys watching from the towers of their school buildings as the sun sets in tones of red and gold and twilight slowly settles on the campus. The hero is dimly conscious of being moved by a feeling, partly of pleasure, partly of melancholy, a sense of regret and affection, of the thoughts of the brevity of youth and of his chances for getting into a game.

There is no doubt of Barbour's historical place in baseball fiction. Moreover, his clear and vivid accounts of the games in his novels were so superior to the newspaper accounts of actual games that sports reporting became more interesting as his books swept the country and the accounts of imaginary games formed the model for the reporting of real ones.

Another popular pre-World War I series, though extremely juvenile and of no literary value, were the alliterative title baseball stories supposedly written by the great Christy Mathewson (*Pitcher Pollock*, *First Base Faulkner*). Actually the stories were ghostwritten by John N. Wheeler, perhaps the first of a long series of ghostwriters for athletes.

Zane Grey, prolific writer of westerns, took time from turning out his popular novels of the West to produce baseball fiction of varying quality. As star of the University of Pennsylvania varsity baseball team and a minor-league player, Grey had a firsthand knowledge of the sport. His *The Short Stop* (1909) is much like the other baseball fiction of the time, but *The Redheaded Outfield and Other Baseball Stories* (1915) is a considerable advancement. In "Old Well-Well" and "The Rube" there is more effort at vivid characterization in addition to a greater realism.

THE best of the juvenile fiction of the time, however, is an undeservedly almost forgotten novel, *The Hummingbird* (1910), by Owen Johnson, famous for his Laurenceville stories and the creator of the famous schoolboy athlete, Dink Stover. More subtle and sophisticated than other baseball fiction of the time, the novel contains superb satire, especially of the elegant variation in the diction of baseball reporters. The "hummingbird" is the term a young reporter for the school's paper applies to a sizzling line drive. In plot, characterization, and style, *The Hummingbird* is the best of the early baseball fiction.

Up to this time baseball fiction had been aimed chiefly at juveniles and was frequently sub-literary. However, the works of such writers as Geraid Beaumont, Charles E. Van Loan, and especially Heywood Broun and Ring Lardner which appeared chiefly from the time of World War I to 1930, were written for adults and apart from their accounts of baseball games and the lives of the players contain insights into man's life and the American scene.

Beaumont, who served as an official scorer for Pacific Coast League games, in a story such as "The Crab" from *Hearts and the Diamond* (1921) produced vivid and realistic descriptions, created lifelike characters, and created extreme human interest. Van Loan, like Lardner, Broun, and Beaumont, was a newspaperman who turned to sports fiction, principally of baseball but also of boxing and golf. The stories in the *Lucky Seventh* (1913) were not as successful in characterization as those in the later *Score by Innings* (1919), of which "Mr. Conley" is probably the best. Van Loan's

stories are slick and commercial but vital and full of vivid characterization.

With Ring Lardner baseball fiction reached new heights. As a sports columnist on the *Chicago Tribune* before World War I, he began writing baseball stories that reveal his intimate knowledge of the ballplayer and his life. Although he later broadened his scope to cover a wide range of the American scene and character, his baseball stories are among his best. His baseball novel *You Know Me, Al* (1916), consisting of a "busher's" letters home, remains as a superb example of Lardner's insight into a player's habits, conversation, and way of life generally. The letters were ostensibly written by the rookie, a barely literate Jack Keefe, to his friend Al back in his home town. The blunt cynicism and broad humor displayed are typical of Lardner. Keefe's malapropisms such as "city serious" for city series are another source of mirth. But it is in his short stories that Lardner is at his best. In "Horseshoes," "Alibi Ike" (which contributed a new expression to the language), "Harmony," and other baseball stories we see the laughing Lardner create memorable characters, depict the life of a baseball player accurately, and at the same time provide perceptive and illuminating insights into human behavior.

Heywood Broun, Harvard-educated baseball reporter, drama critic, and syndicated columnist, employed the idiom of sports even in discussing serious subjects. In addition to his short pieces on baseball, he produced an interesting novel on the game, *The Sun Field* (1923). Like Lardner, Broun is concerned with the human situation, not only in describing the game. In *The Sun Field*, Tiny Tyler, slugging outfielder of the Yankees, who bears a close resemblance to Babe Ruth, marries Judith Winthrop, an intellectual writer for a highbrow magazine. Broun is concerned with the results and problems of the marriage. With Lardner and Broun, baseball fiction for adult readers had become a permanent part of our literature.

THE quality of baseball fiction for adults continued to improve in the 1930's and 40's. Although neither devoted an entire novel to baseball, the fiction of Thomas Wolfe and James T. Farrell contains superb passages dealing with the game, and there are excellent short stories by writers with styles as diverse as those of Robert Penn Warren, James Thurber, and Damon Runyon, in addition to the multitude of baseball stories that appeared during this period aimed at the mass readership of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*.

Thomas Wolfe, who had a great love for baseball and baseball players, produced two outstanding episodes dealing with the national game. In *Of Time and the River* (1935) Wolfe in his typical poetic and unrestrained lyrical style describes a crowd in Altamont (really his home town of Asheville, North Carolina) watching the progress of the final game of the 1912 World Series, indicated on a scoreboard outside the newspaper office. At the same time, Wolfe in his imagination pictures the incomparable beauty and drama of the game as it unfolds in "the great sky-soaring, smoke-gold, and enchanted city of the North. . . ." In this, one of his finest passages, Wolfe sees the game as a means of giving temporary unity to the flux of time. In another passage (from *You Can't Go Home Again*) Wolfe creates a vivid and real sketch of Nebraska Crane, a veteran ballplayer near the end of his career as a big leaguer, that shows Wolfe's intimate knowledge of the sport.

It is no wonder that James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan Trilogy* (1935) and *Danny O'Neill* tetralogy contain frequent passages dealing with the game, for as a boy Farrell's main interest was in baseball, and his own ambition was to become a major league player. He states in *My Baseball Diary*, "Since I

began writing, I always planned to include in my fiction various aspects of baseball." The most vivid is the account of young Danny O'Neill witnessing Ed Walsh pitching a no-hit game, a contest that Farrell himself observed on August 27, 1911. The account reveals Farrell's great love for the game and knowledge of it, and is a revealing portrayal of a young boy's awe for the game and its heroes as well as the action of a ball game at the time.

ANOTHER writer in the Farrell tradition, Nelson Algren, has as the central character in his brutally realistic *Never Come Morning* (1942) a Pole from Chicago's West Side, Bruno "Lefty" Bicek. Bicek, a pitcher of promise as well as a prizefighter, is a victim of his environment unable to become more than a pitcher for neighborhood teams. Only in his dreams does he see himself hurling a no-hit game or reaching the majors.

Of the short stories, Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Penn Warren's "Goodwood Comes Back" (from *The Circus in the Attic and Other Short Stories*, 1941), although not well known, is the most distinguished. It relates the deterioration of Luke Goodwood, a small-town boy who for a brief time became a pitching wizard in the big leagues but then fell a victim of drink and was reduced to pitching weekends in the sticks. Warren shows Goodwood, who was interested only in hunting and fishing and possessed little in the way of intellectual resources, unable to adjust to his new-found wealth and life in the large cities of the North. The story contains no description of an actual ball game but is concerned, as is the work of Malamud and Harris later, with the effect of the game on human behavior.

James Thurber's "You Could Look It Up," which first appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* (1942), is one of the best-known baseball stories, one that inspired Bill Veeck to use a midget in a major league game. Although the game in which the midget, Pearl du Monville, appears is graphically presented, the emphasis is not on the game itself but on human nature. Du Monville, sent into the game at a crucial time to get a walk, in his moment of triumph is unable to resist swinging at the fourth ball and hitting a little roller on which he is retired for the final out. The midget disappears, but the tension on the team is broken, and they launch a winning streak.

In another vein is Damon Runyon's "Baseball Hattie," full of Broadwayese dialect and slang, the story of a woman baseball bug who runs a house of ill-repute and falls in love with a rustic, young left-hander of the Giants.

BASEBALL fiction for juveniles likewise improved vastly in the twenties with the novels of William Heyliger, who avoided the romanticized plot of Barbour and produced realistic, fast-moving stories such as *The Captain of the Nine* and *Batter Up*, plus a host of short stories in *The American Boy*. This greater sophistication was continued in the Forties in the novels of John R. Tunis, such as *The Kid from Tompkinsville*, and Duane Decker, *The Short Stop*, stories which adults read with pleasure. Fiction for boys had been liberated from the straitjacket of the series book and dealt with realistic, tough situations free from the idealization, banter, and horseplay of the early juvenile stories.

Baseball fiction for adults since World War II has developed in several directions—the stories of farce and fantasy, the hardboiled realistic novel that is chiefly only a good story, those which use a baseball game as a framework or include a leading character connected with the game, and those books about the game that are far more than baseball novels, but are concerned with the problems of existence.

In the first group, John Douglas Wallop's *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* (Norton, 1954) is probably best-known, perhaps because it was made into the popular musical comedy and later the movie, *Damn Yankees.* It is the story of Joe Boyd, a middle-aged real estate salesman who sells his soul to the devil to realize a lifelong dream of becoming a major league baseball player and leading his beloved Washington Senators to a pennant.

Also in the realm of fantasy is Valentine Davis' *It Happens Every Spring* (Farrar and Young, 1949), a novel that grew from a film story. The story is a variation on one of Barbour's stories, *Billy Mayes' Great Discovery*, which relates the advantages of a bat made of hoki-moki wood, which attracts horsehide and thus always makes contact with the ball. In Davis' story a young college chemistry instructor discovers a liquid which when applied to a baseball causes it to be repelled by the wood and thus hop over the bat. Under an assumed name and with a sponge wet with the liquid in his glove, the young chemist, who is a great baseball fan, pitches a major league team to the pennant.

Other stories depend for their fantasy and humor on unusual ownership of ball teams. In H. Allen Smith's sex-laden satire *Rhubarb* (Doubleday, 1946), a Tomcat inherits a major league team along with millions. A more recent book, Paul Malloy's *A Pennant for the Kremlin* (Doubleday, 1964), is the wacky story of an eccentric millionaire's bequeathing the Chicago White Sox to the Russians and the resulting problems as they run the team. The book rather obviously makes its point of having the Soviet Commissar of Baseball come to love the American way through his experiences with the national pastime. An even wilder novel is Bud Nye's *Stay Loose* (Doubleday, 1959), in which a tycoon acquires a major league team and seeks to run it as he runs his factory.

Although the baseball novels in this category contribute little to the good literature on the sport, they show that the interest of the author and populace in the game is as great as ever.

TYPICAL of the hard-boiled, realistic baseball novels is Eliot Asinof's *Man on Spikes* (McGraw, 1955), which is liberally sprinkled with profanity and other realistic players' talk. Asinof, who spent three years as a player in the farm system of the Philadelphia Phillies, relates the history of a minor league ballplayer brought up to the majors after his youthful skills have faded. Martin Quigley, in *Today's Game* (Viking, 1965), also describes the game with authenticity. He focuses on a critical game in the managerial career of Barney Mann of the Blue Jays, who has traded one of the best pitchers in the league for a young Negro outfielder, now in a batting slump that may cost the manager his job. Another novel in the realistic vein is Charles Einstein's *The Only Game in Town* (Dell, 1955).

Irwin Shaw's *Voices of a Summer Day* (Delacorte Press, 1965) is a skilful narrative which has as its framework a father (Ben Federov) watching his son play in a neighborhood baseball game. The shouting of the players, the echoes of another time, the languor of the day set the stage for Federov to think of his own exploits on the diamond and from there to go on to review some of the events of his life. The bittersweet nostalgia of the reverie is interrupted at times by a return to the action on the diamond. Thus baseball has provided the impetus and framework for a man to total up the runs, the hits, and the errors of his half-century of life.

The baseball novels of Bernard Malamud and Mark Harris deal with themes much broader and with deeper implications than merely a concern with ball games and the lives of baseball players. Malamud's *The Natural* (Harcourt,

Brace, 1952) through its central character, Roy Hobbs, explores the ballplayer as a folk hero and mythic character. As one critic pointed out, Hobbs "becomes not only Shoeless Joe Jackson but Achilles in his tent and Sir Percival in vain pursuit of the Holy Grail." Roy's team is named symbolically enough the New York Knights, managed by Pop Fisher, who suffers from a skin ailment and laments the dry season.

With his bat, "Wonderboy," which had been scorched by lightning, Hobbs lifts the Knights into a pennant contender, but his initial failure as a human being makes his success shortlived. His pride, gluttony, and weakness for women lead him to half-heartedly throw the crucial game. Too late he has a change of mind. Although at the end Hobbs rises through the moral chaos of the baseball world to become a human being larger than life itself, a figure of Bunyanesque magnitude, his failure and suffering are dramatized as newspaper headlines proclaim his disgrace while he stands in the street and weeps. Malamud has shown how difficult it is to be a hero in a society that demands that its knights resist the forbidden fruits which the masses of weaker flesh enjoy.

Mark Harris' baseball novels, *The Southpaw* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1953); *Bang the Drum Slowly* (Knopf, 1956); and *A Ticket for Seamstitch* (Knopf, 1957), have as their central figure Henry Wiggin, a detached and intelligent, though uneducated, pitcher who also rises as a mythic figure in life as well as in baseball. Harris has Wiggin, a more sophisticated Jack Keefe, relate the stories in the first person and in the vernacular. Wiggin is an extremely real character with compassion for his father, his wife and family, and his teammates. In *Bang the Drum Slowly*, Wiggin's compassion for and loyalty to Bruce Pearson, a third-string catcher slowly dying of Hodgkin's disease, turn the book into far more than a good baseball novel. The work is concerned with the effects of impending death on Bruce and his teammates and their increased awareness. All this is told without sentimentality and with great technical understanding of baseball to produce a novel that examines much more than a game and the life of a ballplayer.

Thus, baseball literature has moved from the story told for the juvenile to the fiction which attracts the intellectual to examine the game in literature for the light it sheds on American life and the paradoxes of modern existence.